This I Believe

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I believe that the most important, far-reaching and revolutionary words ever written are these:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image . . . So God created humankind in his image."

They are, of course, from the first chapter in the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis, words shared by Christians and Jews. They contain a profound idea: namely, there are no expendable people, individual human beings have something of the sacred within them and are thereby creatures of dignity and value deserving of regard and respect. Whether or not you believe the theological assumption behind the words, that there is a God who creates, the words still have profound social and political as well as religious implications.

And so, I believe the second most important words ever written are these:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

They are, of course, the words of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

The men who signed Thomas Jefferson's declaration were deists, most of them, and probably did believe that the dignity of human beings comes from God. Unfortunately the gender implications of their brave declaration would take a century and a half to find political expression, the racial implications longer than that. But it was their translation of that passage into political reality that continues to inspire me and continues to reverberate in our nation's life.

Not without struggle, conflict and sometimes violence, but the best moments in American history are the moments when the nation built into its political structures the radical words of the Declaration and its forerunner in the Book of Genesis: Abraham Lincoln's slow but steady racial consciousness that would result in the Emancipation Proclamation, the early feminist movement resulting in 1920 in universal suffrage, the Civil Rights Movement and the guarantee of voting and other rights in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I believe the best moments in our history, perhaps given their most eloquent expression on August 28, 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “I have a dream” speech, are moments that grew out of the Book of Genesis’ remarkable idea and its echo in the words of the Declaration of Independence.

This topic took on another dimension for me on November 29, 1994, when Rachel Diane Buchanan, my fourth grandchild, came into the world and into my life. Rachel has Down syndrome and it wasn’t long ago that her birth would have been generally regarded with sadness, her parents to be pitied, and she, herself, marginalized, perhaps institutionalized. Instead, Rachel is an integral part of her nuclear and extended family, attends public school with particular attention paid to her special needs. She plays basketball, is helping with her school’s production of Macbeth, sings in the church choir, has learned the amendments to the U.S. Constitution and recently astonished me by reading aloud from a classroom edition of Homer’s *Odyssey*. She greets me, her grandmothers, and her uncles, aunts and cousins, all twelve of them, with joy and enthusiasm. She was confirmed in her church recently and wrote her own statement of faith which seemed to me to capture the very essence of the Christian faith without all the complexities and church paraphernalia we insist on attaching to it.

Rachel has surprised me so many times with what is transpiring in her mind, with what she knows and understands – every single Beatles’ song in addition to Constitutional amendments, that words we have historically assigned to her, and others like her, sound not only inappropriate and cruel but, more appropriately, inaccurate. Rachel and the thousands and thousands of persons with cognitive difficulties who are part of our families and communities, and schools and churches, are helping us fulfill the great hope expressed in words written long ago. Every time I see Rachel and enjoy her exuberant greeting, I think to myself – “created in God’s image!”